COMMUNICATING WITHOUT BIAS

Guidelines for Government

Province of British Columbia

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A MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER

The Government of British Columbia is committed to creating a fair and equitable workplace, with equal access to employment for everyone regardless of gender, race or disability.

To reach that goal, we must continue to find new ways to remove barriers and eliminate discriminatory practices that keep us all from reaching our fullest potential.

The government's gender-inclusive language policy is an important step in that direction. This policy is designed to ensure that all government communications truly reflect the changing world in which we live.

Language is never static. It changes as the people who use it change.

Women should be recognized as full and equal participants in our society. If government is to remain an effective communicator of information and ideas, we must learn to use language that promotes the participation and recognizes the accomplishments of women and men equally.

The Honourable Mike Harcourt, Premier
Province of British Columbia

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AN INTRODUCTION TO GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Gender-inclusive language addresses and includes women and men. As well as being a sign of equal treatment and respect, it is also a means for such treatment and respect.

THE POLICY

It is the policy of the Government of British Columbia that gender-inclusive language be used in all government communications - written, visual and oral.

THE PRINCIPLES

1. Equal Treatment and Respect for Women

Women participate everywhere in our society. Language, the basic tool of communication, is changing to reflect this participation.

However, sexual stereotypes, demeaning references and words that exclude women are still found in everyday speech and in work-place communications. Such language is incompatible with the goal of gender equality.

To be truly equal, women must be seen and heard to be equal. By eliminating language that misrepresents, excludes or offends women, the gender-inclusive language policy will help government lead the way to gender equality throughout the British Columbia workforce.

2. Equality of Opportunity in the Workplace

With the increased participation of women in the workplace, one might assume that the barriers to their full participation, in getting jobs and winning promotions, have been removed.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Gender bias in communications still exists, serving to reinforce attitudes that limit the acceptance of women as equal participants. The government has developed its gender-inclusive language policy to remove this barrier and support its commitment to employment equity.

3. **Clarity of Expression**

Some words and phrases do not convey what people intend to communicate. Some give offence; others are simply open to misinterpretation.

Gender-inclusive language includes women and accurately reflects their contributions. The government's gender-inclusive language policy will, therefore, help to ensure clarity and help us say what we mean.

THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed for government employees. It contains information about gender-inclusive language and advice on how to eliminate gender bias from our written, spoken, visual and audio communications.

For help solving a gender bias problem:

- scan the guide's "Contents" page
- check the index at the back of the guide for a more specific reference
- consult the bibliography, also at the back of the guide, for sources to pursue further

Of course, no guide can answer every language question. Let your day-to-day communication choices be guided by three principles: equal treatment and respect for women, equality of opportunity in the workplace, and clarity of expression.

WOMEN AND MEN AS EQUALS

One of the underlying principles of gender-inclusive language is that women and men are equals.

Equals, of course, deserve equal treatment and equal respect. In language, this equality takes the form of parallel word choices for both men and women, and the elimination of terms that exclude, stereotype or demean women.

The following sections discuss ways we can avoid language that discriminates against women. Some forms of this discrimination are obvious and need little explanation; others are more subtle. But all forms of discriminatory language contribute to attitudes that reinforce barriers - both visible and invisible - to the full and equal participation of women in society and in the workforce.

EQUAL TREATMENT

Whenever you write or speak, strive for overall gender balance. Remember that your audience is made up of both women and men, so address each gender equally.

1. Parallel Language

Be consistent. Use parallel or symmetric language when referring to different sexes at the same time or to individuals.

Instead of	Use
men and ladies	men and women/women and men
man and wife	wife and husband/husband and wife
Ms. Mary Sorensen and Robert Tanaka	Mary Sorensen and Robert Tanaka; Ms. Mary Sorensen and Mr. Robert Tanaka
Mr. Tanaka and Mary	Robert and Mary; Mr. Tanaka and Ms. Sorensen; Tanaka and Sorensen

2. Word Order

Always putting men first in such phrases as *men and women, boys and girls, he or she, his and hers, male and female* gives the impression that women are afterthoughts or somehow less important than men.

Alternate the word order in phrases like these, so that neither women nor men always go first.

Rather than *ladies and gentlemen,* use generic terms that favour neither sex and more accurately reflect the purpose of the gathering or meeting. Examples are *colleagues, delegates,* or *members of the association.*

3. Women as Individuals

Women are often portrayed in relationship to others rather than as individuals. Avoid identifying a woman as somebody's wife, widow, mother, grandmother, or aunt unless it is appropriate in context and you describe men similarly.

Not Dr. Jim Evans, a medical consultant with the Ministry of Health, and his colleague Elizabeth Wong, married to Larry Wong, also with the Ministry of Health, recently published a paper on . . . .

But Dr. Elizabeth Wong and Dr. Jim Evans, medical consultants with the Ministry of Health, recently published a paper on . . . .

Not Larry Cohen works for the Liquor Distribution Branch. His co-worker, Nancy, is married with two children.

But Larry Cohen and Nancy Walker both work for the Liquor Distribution Branch. Larry's wife, Joan Davis, is a lawyer; Nancy's husband, Bill Walker, is a policy analyst in the Branch.

4. Feminine Suffixes

The addition of the feminine suffixes *-ess, -ette* and *-trix* reinforces the notion that generic nouns are male, while female nouns are something less, or at least different. Generic nouns, like those in the right-hand column, should be used for both women and men.

Instead of	Use
actress	actor
aviatrix	aviator
executrix	executor
manageress	manager
sculptress	sculptor
stewardess	flight attendant
usherette	usher
waitress	waiter, server

EQUAL RESPECT

Some language reflects a lack of respect for women that serves to trivialize or demean their accomplishments. This language also creates stereotypes that can confuse, offend and alienate your audience and your co-workers.

1. Girl(s), Gals and Ladies

The term *girl* is *never* appropriate in the workplace, unless you are referring to a minor, or a child.

Not The girl at the reception desk will be able to answer your questions.

But Our receptionist will be able to answer your questions; Anne Miller at the reception desk will be able to answer your questions.

Never refer to adult women as *girls*, *gals* or *ladies* in situations where you would call men men.

Woman is the equivalent of *man*; *women* is the equivalent of *men*.

Not Please make sure that both staff members in the library get a copy. I can't remember their names, but one is a lady and one is a man.

But Please make sure that both staff members in the library get a copy. I can't remember their names, but one is a woman and one is a man.

Do not use *lady*, *woman* or *female* as adjectives — as in *lady doctor*, *woman lawyer*, *woman driver* or *female Deputy Minister* — unless gender is relevant. Remember that language can also stereotype men, as in *male nurse*.

Not The lady defence lawyer and the prosecutor agreed to drop the case.

But The defense lawyer and the prosecutor agreed to drop the case.

If gender is relevant, use the noun *woman*, as in *She became the first woman in 20 years to be appointed a Supreme Court Justice*, or the adjective *female*, as in *The government has appointed the first female Supreme Court Justice in 20 years.*

Avoid using *female* as a noun except in technical writing, such as sociological studies, medical data, or police reports; e.g., *The police arrested two males and three females.*

2. Biased Terms

A biased term is a word or phrase that promotes a preconceived opinion or prejudice. Like *girl*, *gal*, and *lady*, the following biased terms should be avoided:

Instead of	Use
career woman	professional; executive; businessperson; businesswoman (appropriate only if gender is relevant)
checkout girl	cashier; clerk
cleaning lady	cleaner; housekeeper; janitor
co-ed	student
girl Friday	assistant; secretary
housemother	houseparent
housewife	homemaker
Kelly Girl	office temporary; temporary assistant
meter maid	meter attendant

Instead of	Use
salesgirl, saleslady	sales clerk; sales representative; salesperson; saleswoman (appropriate only if gender is relevant)
spinster	woman; unmarried woman (if marital status is relevant)

3. Making Assumptions

Avoid words and phrases that make assumptions about gender:

Not Conference delegates and their wives are invited to attend the breakfast meeting.

But Conference delegates and their spouses are invited to attend the breakfast meeting.

Avoid words and phrases that make assumptions about how women think or look, such as *feminine intuition, the fair sex, the little woman,* or *the weaker sex.*

Avoid words and phrases that make assumptions about how men and women behave, such as describing a man as aggressive or assertive, while a woman is strident, shrill or bitchy; and stereotypical terms and phrases like the *better half, just like a man, masculine drive, women's work, manfully, manly* or *ladylike.*

4. Terms of Endearment

Terms of endearment, such as *dear, honey* and *sweetie* are inappropriate in professional relationships.

FORMS OF ADDRESS

Figuring out how to address women today, either in letters or in person, can be confusing. Women are moving into positions that have traditionally been held by men; some women are choosing to keep their own names after marriage; others prefer to be addressed as Ms., even when they have chosen to take their husband's last name.

In the past, when a woman named Janet Vedrody married a man named Ed Schmidt, she automatically took his name and became Mrs. Ed Schmidt. Today this practice is changing. The following are examples of how to address the use of marital status in correspondence. **Regardless of the examples, always respect a woman's right to be addressed as she prefers, that is, as she indicates on her correspondence.** If a woman signs a letter as Mrs. Harold Chow, that is the name you would use when you reply to her letter.

GENERAL RULES

Here are a few general rules about appropriate written and oral forms of address:

1. ***Ms., Mrs., Miss* and *Mr.***

   The practice of identifying women by their marital status began in the eighteenth century. Today, however, this is no longer considered either necessary or appropriate.

   The female equivalent of *Mr.* is *Ms.* Like both *Mrs.* and *Miss*, *Ms.* is an abbreviation of the obsolete courtesy title *Mistress*. It emerged in the 1940s as a marital-status-free alternative for women, and has gained almost universal acceptance throughout the English-speaking world.

   On most occasions, and particularly when writing letters, it is possible to eliminate courtesy titles altogether and simply call people by their names.

Not Miss Theresa Desjardins and Mr. Donald Clark

But Theresa Desjardins and Donald Clark

If, however, you do not know the person's first name, or the occasion definitely calls for a courtesy title, use *Ms.*, unless a woman indicates she wishes to be called *Mrs.* or *Miss*, or holds a professional title such as *Dr.*

2. **Marital Status**

You know that a woman took her husband's last name. For example, Janet Schmidt is married to Ed Schmidt:

Not Mrs. Ed Schmidt

But Janet Schmidt; Mrs. Janet Schmidt

Not Ed Schmidt and his wife Janet

But Janet and Ed Schmidt; Mr. and Mrs. Schmidt

You know that a married woman has not taken her husband's last name. For example, Helen Moore is married to Claude LeBlanc:

Not Mrs. Helen Moore

But Helen Moore; Ms. Helen Moore

Not Mr. and Mrs. LeBlanc

But Claude LeBlanc and Helen Moore; Mr. Claude LeBlanc and Ms. Helen Moore

You know that a woman is married, but you are not sure whose last name she is using. For example, you are writing to Anne Goldberg:

Not Mrs. Anne Goldberg

But Anne Golderg; Ms. Anne Goldberg

3. Professional Titles

If a woman or man holds a professional or academic title, use it, e.g., *Dr. Singh; Professor Roberts.*

When addressing a government minister who has taken her husband's last name, use *the Honourable* or *Hon.* without a courtesy title. You may also choose to address the minister simply by name, or as Minister.

Not The Honourable Mrs. Sheila Hejka

But The Honourable Sheila Hejka; Hon. Sheila Hejka; Dear Mrs. Sheila Hejka; Dear Sheila Hejka; Dear Minister

4. Writing to People You Do Not Know

Certain names are obviously female or male. Others, like Robin, Sidney, Chris or Lesley, are ambiguous. It is now common to omit courtesy titles altogether, a rule which is especially helpful when the signature does not make gender or marital status clear.

Not Dear Mrs. Chris Wilson; Dear Mr. Howard Golinki

But Dear Chris Wilson; Dear Howard Golinki

Use a courtesy title only when you do not know your correspondent's first name, but you do know her or his gender; e.g., *Dear Ms. Wilson; Dear Mr. Golinki.*

If you are writing to a person you do not know at all, use *Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Madam or Sir,* or address your letter to a specific title; e.g., *Dear Office Manager, Dear Financial Assistance Worker.* Avoid using *To whom it may concern.*

If you know only an initial or initials and last name of the person to whom you are writing, use the initials without a courtesy title; e.g., *Dear J. Thompson, Dear L.K. Tan.*

5. Writing to More than One Person

When you are writing to more than one person of the same gender, either omit courtesy titles; e.g., *Dear Maria Rodrigues and Muriel Bernstein* or *Dear Edward Anderson and Norman Leland,* or use *Mses.* for women and *Messrs.* for men; e.g., *Dear Mses. Rodrigues and Bernstein; Dear Messrs. Anderson and Leland.*

When writing to two or more people of different genders, use courtesy titles; e.g., *Dear Ms. Chalmers and Mr. MacDonald* or omit them; e.g., *Dear Rhonda Chalmers and Charles MacDonald.*

When writing to a group or organization (gender unknown), use *Dear Colleagues* or *Dear Members.* Never use the exclusive *Dear Sirs.*

6. Circulating a Document

When circulating a document, be consistent in your form of address:

Not pc: Ms. Alice McKinnon, C.L. Carter, Mr. Carl Ellis, Miss Regina Rogers

But pc: Alice McKinnon, Chris Carter, Carl Ellis, Regina Rogers

FALSE GENERICS

Generics are nouns and pronouns intended to be used for both women and men. Some generics are also male-specific, which creates ambiguity and excludes women. Male-specific generics, or false generics, tend to call up primarily male images for readers and listeners. Their continued use, therefore, is incompatible with gender-inclusive language.

The following discussion will provide you with an understanding of how these false generics came into use and how you can eliminate them from your writing and conversation.

MAN/HE

1. ***Man***

   Originally, *man* meant *human being* or *person*, but over the years it has come to be used both generically and to denote male human beings only.

   For many people, the generic use of *man* results in ambiguity. Does the writer or speaker mean men only, or are women included as well? You can avoid this confusion by using gender-inclusive generics, thus ensuring that women are included and represented fairly in your writing and conversation.

   Below is a list of common false generics and some suggested alternatives. This list is intended as a guide; it is not exhaustive. For more detailed suggestions, consult *The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage* by Rosalie Maggio (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

   Remember that many words that include the word *man* - like, *manage, mandate, manuscript* and *mandolin* - are not false generics. This guide suggests alternatives only to those words or phrases that obviously exclude women.

One way to deal with gender-specific references is to use them gender-fairly. Gender-fair usage involves the equal and symmetrical use of gender-specific terms, and overall fairness to both sexes. For example, if businesswoman or businessman are used, rather than businessperson, they should be used an equal number of times; neither word should be used "generically" unless gender is relevant in the context.

Instead of	Use
alderman	councillor
businessman	businessperson (businessman and business woman appropriate if used gender-fairly – i.e., an equal number of times – or if gender is relevant)
cameraman	camera operator
clergyman	cleric (or be specific, e.g., preacher, bishop)
draftsman	drafter; draftsperson
early man, primitive man	early peoples; primitive humans
fireman	firefighter
fisherman	fisher; angler; (fisherwoman and fisherman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)
foreman	supervisor; chief; lead or head supervisor
handyman	caretaker; repairer (handyman and handywoman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)
mailman	letter carrier

Instead of	Use
man	human beings; people; individuals
man (verb)	staff; operate; serve at/on
man-days/hours	worker-days/hours
mankind	humankind; human beings; people; individuals
man-made	synthetic; artificial; handmade
manpower	staff; employees; human resources; personnel
middleman	go-between; intermediary; facilitator
newsman	reporter; journalist (or be specific, e.g., columnist)
policeman	police officer (policeman and policewoman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)
repairman	repairer; technician (or be specific, e.g., mechanic, electrician)
salesman	sales clerk; sales representative; salesperson (saleswoman and salesman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)
spokesman	spokesperson (spokeswoman and spokesman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant); representative
sportsman	athlete; sports lover; sports enthusiast (sportsman and sportswoman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)

Instead of	Use
tradesman	tradesperson (tradeswoman and tradesman appropriate if used gender-fairly or if gender is relevant)
watchman	watch; security guard
workman	worker

2. Chairman/Chair

Chairman probably generates more discussion than any other gender-specific word. The two most commonly used alternatives are *chair* and *chairperson.*

Some people, however, think that the use of *chair* is illogical, and they object to being called "a piece of furniture." But *chair* has been used in this sense since the seventeenth century. *Chair* is an example of metonymy, a figure of speech which describes something in terms of its associated qualities – such as *turf* for *horse-racing* or *Crown* for *queen* or *king.*

Remember that if *chair* does not seem right to you, there are other alternatives to *chairman* you might consider, such as *convener, coordinator, moderator,* or *president.*

When addressing the chair directly, most people use *Madam Chair* or *Mr. Chair.* Because *Madam* is not gender-parallel to *Mr.*, other alternatives, such as *Ms. Chair,* are also being used.

3. *He, His* and *Him*

The English language has no sex-indefinite, third-person pronoun, so most of us learned in school that it is grammatically correct to use the pronouns *he, his* and *him* when referring to singular antecedents of unspecified gender.

For example, we were taught to say *Every employee will receive his T-4 form in February* or, *Each student must meet with his advisor,* even when we were referring to employees or students of both sexes.

This is no longer acceptable, but some people feel that the alternatives to the false generic *he* produce clumsy, unclear writing. This need not be the case. With a little thought and effort, you can write well and avoid gender-exclusive language. For example, you can say *Employees will receive their T-4 forms in February.*

Some alternatives to *he, his* and *him* are more appropriate in certain situations than others. Your choice will depend on a number of factors, such as the tone you wish to adopt and the audience you are addressing.

Just remember two things:

- Avoid alternating between false generic *she* and false generic *he*. Do not use *she* in one paragraph, *he* in the next, and so on. This is confusing to your audience.

- Do not use *he* with a disclaimer to indicate that even though you are using the male pronoun, you intend it to include women as well. This technique is illogical because it advises readers to ignore what you have written. There are many other effective alternatives to "generic" *he*.

Keep in mind that your goal is twofold: to eliminate gender bias and to express yourself as clearly as possible.

A. Use the plural

Rewriting a sentence in the plural is often the best choice.

Not Each office manager should ensure that he attends the meeting.

But Office managers should ensure that they attend the meeting.

B. Eliminate personal pronouns

Another useful technique is to eliminate gender-specific personal pronouns altogether.

Some sentences can be rewritten easily:

Not Each applicant must submit his resume.

But Each applicant must submit a resume.

Others might need to be restructured:

Not A social worker must provide good service to his clients if he wants to make a difference.

But A social worker who wants to make a difference must provide good client service.

C. Use *she or he/he or she*

She or he (or *he or she*) has long been an acceptable substitute for false generic *he*. Some people use it specifically to draw attention to the fact that they are including both women and men; e.g., *Each applicant must submit his or her resume.*

Used sparingly, *he or she* and *she or he* are very helpful solutions. However, repeating them frequently throughout a passage will alienate even the most dedicated reader.

Avoid using *s/he* or *(s)he* or any of their variants. Although these forms provide a quick solution, most readers find them awkward or interruptive.

D. **Use *you/your***

In some cases, you can avoid using *he* by addressing the reader directly. This is a particularly good alternative when explaining how to do something.

Not Each driver must be sure to renew his automobile insurance yearly.

But Be sure to renew your automobile insurance yearly.

E. **Use *one***

You can sometimes use *one* in place of a third-person pronoun. Bear in mind that this word choice will change the tone of your writing, making it more formal.

Not A director should require an estimate before he hires a consultant.

But As a director, one should require an estimate before hiring a consultant.

F. **Use a gender-inclusive synonym**

Try using a gender-inclusive synonym instead of the false generic *he*.

Not Every government ministry has a deputy minister. He is responsible for the overall administration of the ministry.

But Every government ministry has a deputy minister. This official is responsible for the overall administration of the ministry.

G. Rewrite the sentence

If all else fails, rewrite the sentence to eliminate false generic *he*.

Not When an editor revises a document, he usually marks his changes in red.

But When revising a document, an editor usually marks changes in red.

-or-

An editor who is revising a document usually marks changes in red.

-or-

Editors usually mark their changes in red.

NON-WRITTEN MATERIALS

Audio and visual materials are powerful communication tools that influence perceptions and attitudes. Because the government is committed to a leadership role in changing attitudes towards women, all government communications must portray women equitably and fairly.

The principles underlying gender-inclusive guidelines for written and oral communications apply to audio and visual materials as well. Women and men should be portrayed as equals, rather than having roles and characteristics assigned on the basis of gender. Women should be depicted as having equal opportunities, being in positions of authority, and succeeding in a wide variety of endeavours.

VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

While it may not be possible to have an equal number of women and men in every photograph, illustration, cartoon or video segment, it is important that the total presentation in these media be as balanced as possible. To achieve balance, you should show men in roles or jobs women have traditionally held, for example, as nurses or secretaries.

Visual communications portraying men and women fairly show women:

- as equal and active participants in all aspects of life - at home, in the workplace, at school, in public life and in the community;
- as being of various ages and ethnic origins, and of differing physical attributes;
- in non-traditional and non-stereotypical roles; e.g., women in technical or financial positions;
- in positions at all levels of authority and of comparable status;

- as being successful in a variety of endeavours, e.g., career, home, education, community, public life; and

- in equal numbers.

Avoid conveying unintentional or subliminal messages about women. Show women:

- in postures, expressions, gestures and clothing that convey equal status and authority; and

- as being businesslike and serious.

AUDIO/ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Audio/oral communications, whether on their own or as part of a visual presentation, should be guided by the same principles of fairness as written and visual materials. In addition, when preparing speeches, seminars and audio-visual voice-overs, remember to:

- use women as interviewers, interviewees and speakers at events;

- use female voices as often as male voices in voice-overs, regardless of subject matter; and

- ensure that dialogue and style of expression convey equal status and authority when alternating between male and female voices.

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